Flight-Deck Fender Bender

By Ltjg. Paul Till

A beautiful afternoon in the Arabian Sea awaited me after an uneventful six-hour Operation Enduring Freedom mission over Afghanistan. I was halfway through my nugget cruise in a Hornet squadron, and operations had become routine: We flew the same missions every day. Routine ops made the flight-deck environment more dangerous than usual and led me into a potentially deadly situation.

I had just chalked up an OK 3-wire and cleared the landing area. Yellowshirts guided me toward the bow. I taxied around the starboard shuttle, then went aft and parked adjacent to a Hornet halfway down cat 1. The controlling yellowshirt signaled the blueshirts to install chocks and tie-down chains. I thought I was finished taxiing for the day; I was very mistaken.

After setting the parking brake and paddling off the nosewheel steering, I began my preshut-

down checks, safed my ejection seat, released my upper Koch fittings, and removed my oxygen mask. When I twisted left to secure the oxygen flow, I suddenly noticed the jet next to mine appeared to be moving, which I thought was peculiar. I quickly learned my jet, instead, was rolling forward. I immediately stomped on the brakes, and my left hand reached for the parking-brake handle. To my surprise, I found the handle disengaged.

The aircraft rolled nearly 20 feet from where I recognized the movement to where I reacted. Afterward, I reset the parking brake, looked over my left shoulder, and saw my left wing overlapped the right stab of the other jet. At first, it looked like the jets were not touching, but after I shut down and climbed out, I could see the jets were touching.

I had had a fender bender with the jet parked to my left. The leading edge of my left outboard pylon dented the trailing edge of the adjacent jet's right stabilator. My Hornet escaped unscathed, but the neighboring jet sustained enough damage to keep it off the flight schedule for over a month.

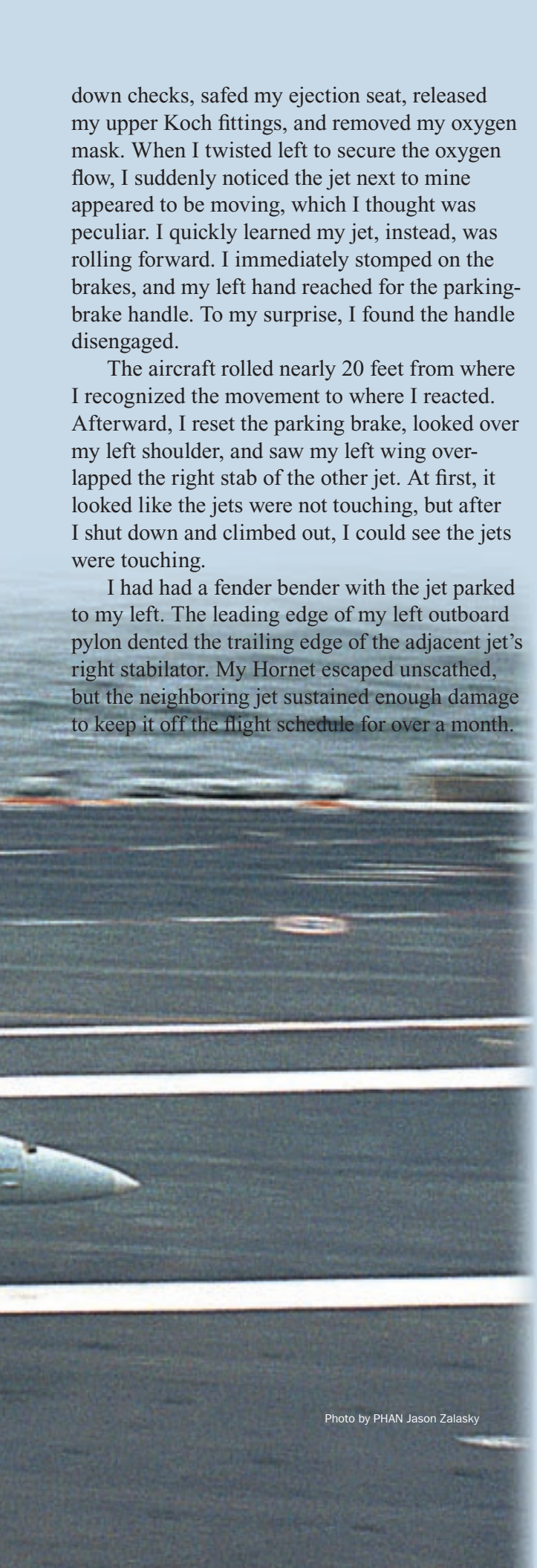

Photo by PHAN Jason Zalasky

Fortunately, the blueshirts under the aircraft avoided injury when the aircraft rolled ahead.

How did this happen? I placed too much confidence in the parking brake. Almost all Hornet pilots unknowingly have disengaged the parking brake at least once. The handle is positioned one-half inch from the pilot's left knee and easily can be disengaged by the pilot if he moves around in his seat. The day after my crunch, a squadron department head inadvertently disengaged his parking brake on the flight deck, and the aircraft began to roll. He stopped it before damaging anything.

When an aircraft isn't chocked and chained, a pilot's primary focus should be the positive control of aircraft movement. I never saw the yellowshirt director frantically wave his arms in front of my jet. Instead, my focus was on preshutdown checks inside the cockpit.

After spending seven hours sitting in the ejection seat, I was too eager to get unstrapped. FA-18 NATOPS states the following under carrier-based procedures: "The canopy should be down, oxygen mask on, and the ejection seat armed during taxi." Although I thought I was finished taxiing, I was not. I should have

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remained armed and completely strapped into my seat until the aircraft was chocked and chained.

Finally, I got lax on the flight deck, one of the most dangerous work environments in the world. I allowed myself to become preoccupied with checklist items that could have waited.

Settling into a routine can cause you to lower your guard and stray from basic procedures. The focus of our briefs and missions were combat operations over Afghanistan, not the administrative issues we take for granted. Even in combat, the adage, "The flight isn't over until the paperwork is complete," still applies.

Ltjg. Till flies with VFA-146.